

# Stagecoach Days

By FRANK BALL

One of the most colorful periods of American history was the era of the turnpike. Stagecoach drivers were young men with tested driving skill, wearing big hats, leather gloves, and bright clothes. The stagecoaches were always brightly painted, the horses were the best money could buy, and the sleek harness adorned with bright ribbons and tinkling ornaments. Stagecoaches carried passengers and baggage to the extent of twenty pounds a person. More than this was classed as freight and became a part of the cargo of some long freight wagon. Travelers paid their own toll at gates spaced four miles apart. The price was  $6\frac{1}{4}$  cents a gate if you bought a book of tickets before your trip. Separate toll charges were ten cents each.

Giant freight wagons drawn by six sturdy horses, as was the stagecoach, passed frequently. They carried anything from the west that would sell in the east, and anything from the east that would sell on the other side of the mountains.

Plodding drovers driving thousands of cattle, sheep, hogs, or turkeys to eastern cities hampered traffic to a great extent. And stagecoaches must run on schedule. A stage driver would be discharged quicker for failing to keep his schedule than for being intoxicated. For there was strong competition along the turnpike, and trade must be looked after by service.

The caste system was in vogue for the inns along the American turnpike. There were stage stands, wagon stands, and drover stands. The stagecoach drivers and their passengers lodged at the stage stands. They refused to stop elsewhere. And an inn that dallied to stage

trade wouldn't dare jeopardize its social standing by accommodating teamsters or drovers. Not so wide a gap, however, stood between the teamsters and the drovers. While there were wagon stands and drover stands, yet they had been known to mix in case of necessity.

There were many stands to accommodate turnpike travel. A stretch of the old James River and Kanawha turnpike forty miles long in Kanawha County, West Virginia, is recorded as having thirty stands along it.

The James River and Kanawha turnpike was the outgrowth of the old James River and Kanawha Canal. The canal, started from Richmond in 1785, was intended to cross the Alleghenies by way of the James and Greenbrier Rivers to connect with the Kanawha. The canal was stopped at Balcony Falls, Virginia, and the Virginia legislature, in 1824, authorized the building of a 200-mile turnpike across the mountains to the Ohio River. By 1828, this turnpike had reached the Ohio at the mouth of the Big Sandy River.

Two gentlemen by the names of Caldwell and Surbough formed the first stagecoach company along this road. They began operating stages between Lewisburg and Charleston (West) Virginia, in 1827. A year later they extended their lines to the Big Sandy. The fare from Lewisburg to Charleston was \$7.00.

Trips were made between the Big Sandy and Lewisburg three times weekly. By traveling seventy to eighty miles daily, this distance could be covered in two days and a half. This speed necessitated changes of horses often.

The fare from the mouth of Big Sandy to Guyandotte was seventy-five cents; to Charleston, \$4.50; to Lewisburg, \$11.00. At the driver's election, baggage in excess of twenty pounds a passenger could be carried at the rate of \$4.00 a hundred pounds for each hundred miles.

Caldwell and Surbough sold the stage line to Porter and Belden in 1829. And these men sought to gain business by advertising daytime driving and rest on Sunday.

Toll gates were bothersome and expensive. People going to mill, or those residing near a toll gate, were exempt from paying toll at that gate. Many abused this privilege. Farmers often allowed traffic to pass through their fields, detouring toll gates, for a less charge than toll gate charges.

There were many colorful personalities along the turnpike. The James River and Kanawha road had its "Jehu Jo" Perkins who lived at Boomer in Fayette County, West Virginia; its Leonard Turner who had his coach and horses captured during the War Between the States; and its slashing Dic Vandever who drove the last stagecoach between Charleston and Lewisburg in 1873. And there were the inn proprietors who took pride in serving their guests, providing the best conveniences available for the period. Then there were shopping places of different nature all along the route. One of the most noted stage stops was the Old Stone Tavern near Clifftop in Fayette County, West Virginia. Generals Lee and Rosecrans used the building as headquarters at different times during the War Between the States. Other notables known to have stopped there are Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, Thomas H. Benton, Daniel Webster, and John C. Breckenridge.

Today, passengers in much greater numbers ride fast clean trains along this general route, the baggage is neatly stacked in the cars ahead, the rate is much cheaper, and giant freight cars carry a thousand times more freight than the colorful freight wagons of a century ago.